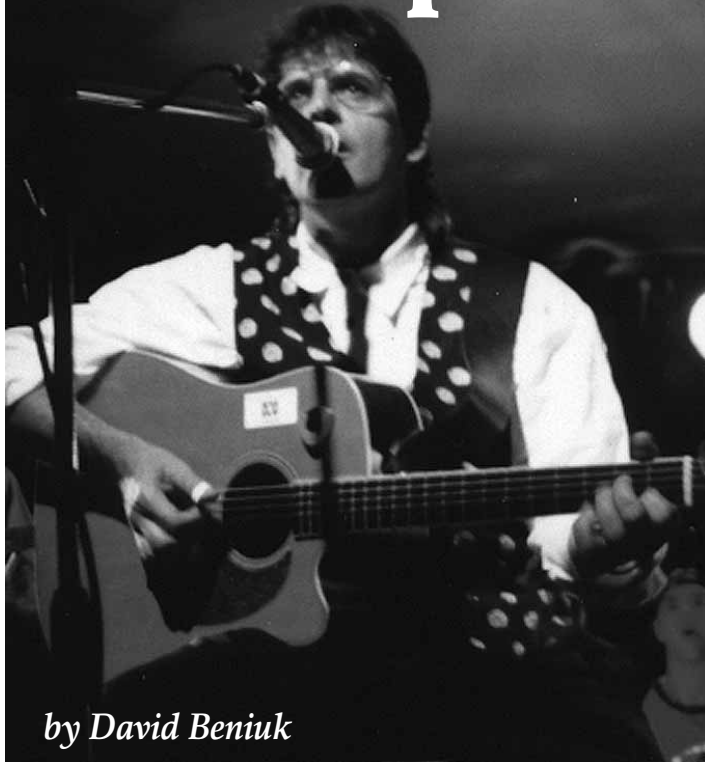


# The People's Philosopher



by David Beniuk

Read through the liner note essays on Pat Drummond's new double CD offering, *The Chess Set*, and you discover a man asking the big questions - the one's about human nature, progress, art and justice. You also discover song titles like 'The Lovin' of the Bush' and 'Marilyn Monroe was a Size 14'. Drummond has a knack for marrying his wonderment at life's complexities with the language and stories of real people. There are plenty of people's poets about the place. Pat Drummond is more people's philosopher.

The 25 songs that make up *The Chess Set* come as two volumes, *The Age of Dissent* (Volume 1) and *The Descent of Age* (Volume 2). They're two quite different albums from two different Pat Drummonds. On *Dissent* our narrator, a Black Knight, clings to his generation's belief that songs can change the world. It's Pat Drummond as angry middle-aged man. On *Descent* his White nemesis is more prepared to accept the world as it is and look inward for change. Drummond as wise middle-aged man perhaps.

The set represents a major philosophical work for Drummond, a doyen of the pub, folk and country music scenes. It also represents a new phase in Drummond's 30-year career as a folk/punk, a one-man sing-a-long band, a romantic country singer and a musical pressman.

*'I deliberately set out to write about the political divisions that have emerged in Australia,'* he says.

For earlier albums, Drummond had travelled the country, finding real people's stories and, as the pressman, 'reporting' them as songs. He'd created what he believed were accurate 'jigsaw puzzle snapshots' of where his country was. By 2002 he realised his journalistic approach could no longer tell the whole story. So were born his philosophers, the narrator Knights.

*'If you were talking about any issue virtually, it depended on who you were speaking to,'* he explains. *'It wasn't just if they were for or against a public policy, like our detention of refugees or our involvement in the war in Iraq or our involvement in free trade agreements. It was a passionate position that divided the nation in a way I hadn't seen since the days of the Vietnam War.'*

Now 53 and a grandfather, Pat Drummond doesn't give a lie to a life of ceaseless gigs and late night lugs. He's a little weather-beaten, hair greying in clumps at the sides. In a faded

black T-shirt and jeans he seems to have shrunk a little from the super-confident on-stage persona. With those famous spectacles on the table, the observation glass has been removed and you're in the same room with him.

The five Drummond boys grew up in Sydney's inner west, sneaking out to folk gigs and becoming mesmerised by the 'magic' of the finger-style players they saw there. It's the trendy home to most of Sydney's acoustic gigs these days, but Pat Drummond recalls a very different place.

*'I was three when I watched a friend of mine, a policeman who used to talk to me on the steps of my house every day, stabbed with a bottle outside my house,'* he says. *'It was a fairly violent and working-class place. It also had the most incredible community and spirit.'*

Drummond watched the world change from here, where his community's Rugby League team, the Western Suburbs Magpies, became a metaphor for all that was going on outside.

*'How crushing it was to watch those kids come up, and just when they were about to step into first grade and they were invincible, they were bought by Manly,'* he says. *'Instead of that community, every person was an individual with their price. It finished me with sport completely.'*

While training as a teacher in the early 70s, Drummond and his friends went to see Melbourne unknown Paul Kelly, booked to play *The Journey's End* wine bar at Woolloomooloo. A Kelly no-show sent Pat's go-getter friend (and future Nuclear Disarmament Party Senator) Robert Wood into action. Wood soon tapped him on the shoulder and told him: 'You're on.' Seven years later, Pat Drummond was still performing there every Sunday.

*'It was just an accident. I went to see Paul Kelly play, he didn't turn up,'* Pat says now of how a three-decade full-time music career got started.

They may have started as an accident, but Pat Drummond's one-man shows went on to become the stuff of legend, most infamously at *The Rest Hotel*, nestled beside the northern exit of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Drummond took the 'stage' there on Friday nights for more than a decade and recorded a live album that captured a last gasp of an older Sydney.

*'People could say, "Oh my God, you mean you were responsible for those shitty drum machines?"'* he says of his pioneering work ripping the circuitry out of a Hammond organ to build a prototype.

While he was at it, Pat Drummond also managed to 'accidentally' invent the truly independent record in this country.

*'When I went to CBS they'd never heard of anyone putting out their*

*own album, let alone buying 5000 of them,'* he says of the early vinyl cuts that established his successful country/folk label Shoestring Records.

*'I wasn't trying to pioneer an industry, it was an accident and then it worked out so other people started doing some of those things as well.'*

When *The Rest* was sold and demolished in the late 80s, it inadvertently gave Drummond an opportunity: to change stage personas and concentrate more on his songwriting and touring. *'I said [to Wood] "I've sung American Pie more times than Don McLean has... I've got to stop this..."'* So was born the reporter, complete with pressman's hat and garb, and a 'paper' to write for, *The Local Rag*. Drummond watched his gig income drop 'through the floor', but he started making money from selling records.

*'We became Tupperware salesmen,'* he says. *'We go out and do these kind of parties and we sell plastic at the end of it. In a way it was more honest because we weren't peddling grog so much as peddling our music.'*

It was self-consciously Australian music that Drummond, the musical journalist, set out to create. Like his colleagues from Redgum and *The Bushwackers*, it would be delivered in as broad an Aussie brogue as folk/rock would allow. Defining Australian music, though, would not be Pat Drummond's lifelong project.

*'I've become suspicious of that,'* he says now. *'Things like national identity are good as far as giving you a sense of tribal family feeling, but they are also very effective in creating divisions.'*

It's probably the White Knight from *The Chess Set* philosophising now, rejecting a fundamentalist kind of national identity. But Drummond's recent work has begun to use the language of religion.

*'I've looked back over my work and realised just how much my own faith-life has drawn its symbols and its angles on its stories from my life as an Australian catholic brought up in De La Salle schools and subject to fairly stringent theological training,'* he explains. *'What's*

